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ABSTRACT

Since her Certificates in General Education for Adults class had not achieved the required competencies at writing for self-expression, a teacher felt it would be an appropriate genre for her to model. She drafted, edited, and completed the text on a large-screen computer. When trying to decide whether each text achieved the competencies required at each level, the teacher became aware of difficulties experienced by the students as authors and herself as a marker. The class wanted the text to be perfect from the beginning; the teacher wanted to focus on the writing process. In the second writing session, the class was more vocal and critical. The strategies the class used to try to tighten and amend part of the teacher's writing changed quite markedly between the two sessions. The teacher was frustrated that she and the class did not share a meta-language to describe faults and features of texts. By not preparing ahead, the teacher became more realistically aware of the thoughts and feelings of a less experienced writer and perceived more clearly how writing can be so daunting to students. One of the teacher's main points was to demonstrate that very few writers get it right first time. The students realized writing is always a struggle, and constructing, clarifying, and revising written texts are the most important tasks. The teacher discovered the curriculum she used had problematic features she must address. (YLB)

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The literacy teacher as model writer

Annette Green teaches adult literacy at ACE North Coast Inc., Lismore.

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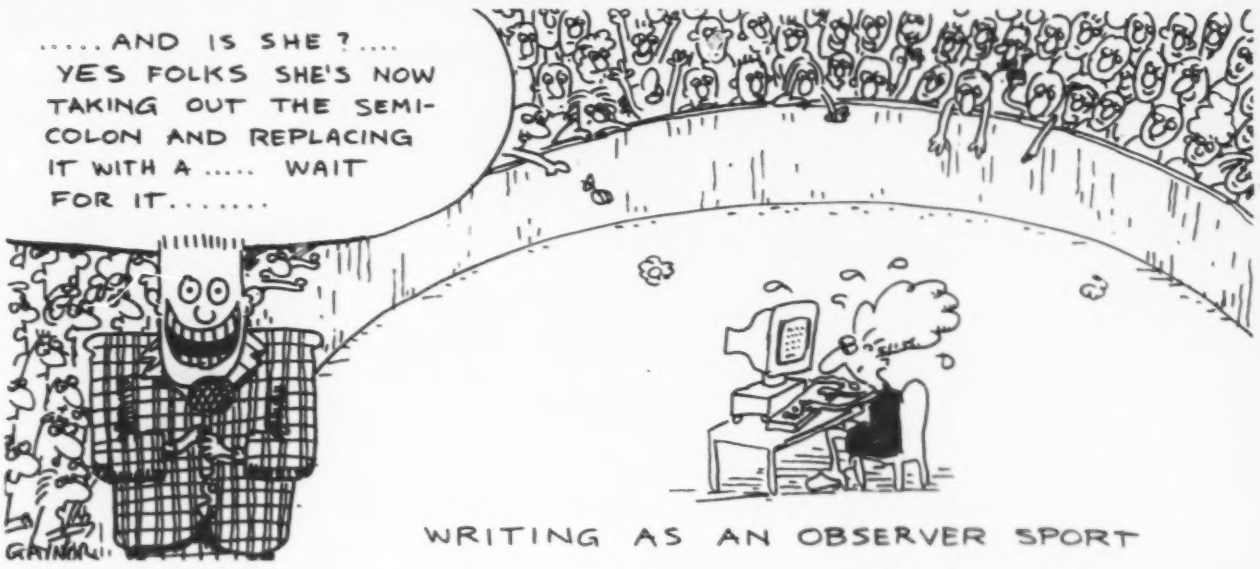

WRITING AS AN OBSERVER SPORT

We often discuss "modelling" in terms of writing, so I decided to take this a step further and write for my Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) class, who are completing "Module 2: Reading and Writing".

My students had already made a few attempts at writing for self-expression and had not really achieved the required competencies at this level, and in this task in particular. I therefore decided it would be an appropriate genre to personally model for the class, and hoped that the ensuing discussion would open up the field of personal writing for them. They seem to feel that functional writing is "more their level", and we have spent a lot of time on procedural texts, letters, writing for public debate and other functional styles of writing. The genres they feel most competent with are the ones which have a clear format which they can follow. They equate personal writing with failures in writing at school — they could never decide what the teacher wanted them to produce.

This group is accustomed to discussing and sharing their writing. They carefully offer suggestions as to how their own texts and those of other students could be improved. Although they continually look to me for reassurance, they have strong ideas as to how texts should sound. Their writing style often seems to reflect the fact that they, as people who have done limited reading as adults, tend to gather much of their language from radio and television.

The class was very excited when I outlined what I had in mind for these sessions. Were they expecting a minor masterpiece, I wondered nervously as I approached the first session. I am still trying to quash the idea of "Annette, the master speller" and replace it with the idea that literacy learning is lifelong and that nobody has mastered the spelling of every word in the English language. I consoled myself with the thought that at least they were unlikely to idealise me as "Annette, the perfect writer" after these sessions.

Although I have modelled texts and involved the class quite frequently with joint construction of texts, I had not written "off my own bat" in front of the class before. I drafted, edited and completed the text on a large-screen computer. By printing out and labelling the various drafts, we were able to check the progress of the text. This is a useful technique in presenting student work for moderation, as the issue of teacher assistance can be evidenced more easily. The enormous screen meant that everyone could see what was being written, so I did not always read aloud. Two members of the group have recently bought home computers and we have all been trying to experiment with writing first drafts on the computer (rather than copying the "final version" of texts for publication, an approach I like less than writing/composing directly on to the computer).

We had an extended discussion on the fairness or otherwise of two students using a spellchecker on assignment pieces. We concluded that it was a great tool in many circumstances, and that if our spelling was close enough for the spellchecker to pick up what word we meant, we were getting somewhere.

At the beginning, the students were very interested in helping me. I found it quite disconcerting — in some ways, it was more like joint construction of a text rather than me demonstrating how a person writes. We had done a lot of joint construction, which I found an artificial experience insofar as I was not really at ease composing and constructing in front of a class while

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trying to keep the writing my own rather than just using it as a teaching tool.

I learned during this experience that the parameters of our set curriculum, the CGEA, made the writing rather constrained. I was always checking back to what the writing needed to demonstrate in terms of criteria and competencies. When trying to decide whether each text achieved the competencies required for each type of text at each level, I became much more in tune with the difficulties experienced by both the students as authors and myself as a marker. After this experience, I wondered if we should change the curriculum so that all the competencies are on a checklist but are not grouped according to assessment piece, so that students may assemble a portfolio of texts which demonstrate the achievement of all the competencies without them being assigned to a particular assessment item. The rewritten CGEA is closer to this idea and consequently easier to use.

The class continually questioned both the material and the style, something I am still not sure that they do with their own texts. They were also very interested in any spelling or typing errors I made. They wanted the text to be perfect from the beginning, a reflection of the type of writing they believed good writers would turn out "first go", rather than editing at a later stage. I wanted the class to focus on the writing process, the ways we get material down, rather than sticking at the surface level and concentrating on a perfect product from the start. Their comments showed they were shocked that I could happily read over the text without continually fixing it up. I think this was very instructive for them.

Beneath the surface

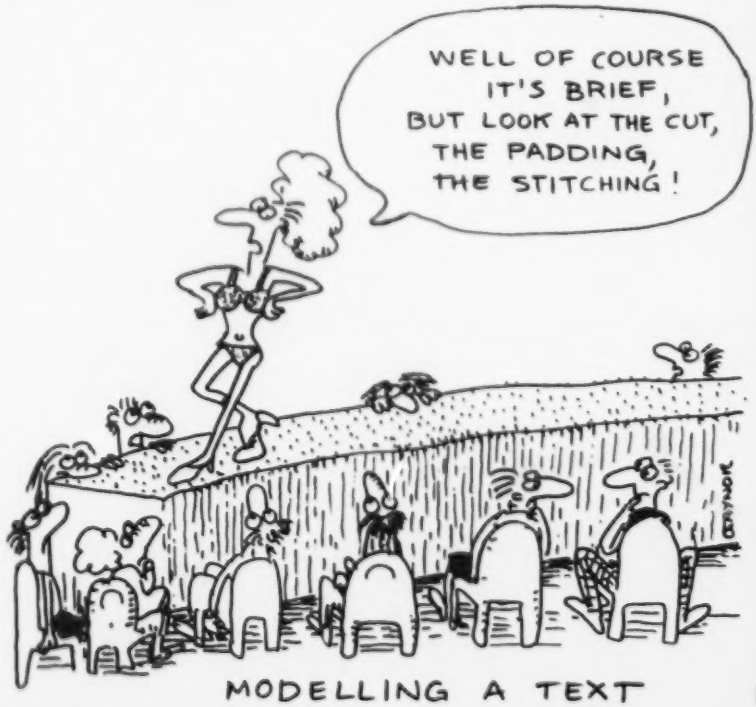
In the second writing session, the class was a lot more vocal and critical. Words were suggested continuously, and I became far more receptive to the class and went along with their suggestions far more readily. Perhaps I was considering the idea of giving up "personal voice" in favour of altering the focus to working together on my text. It seems it *is* possible to retain ownership while accepting comments and suggestions for revision. I also really enjoyed the fact that we came to grips with topics such as editing, being overly concerned with perfection during the first draft and changing tenses while in a text. For example, the idea of present and past continuous was discussed at length during this session.

The strategies that the class used to try to tighten and amend parts of my writing changed quite markedly between the two sessions. In the second session, the focus was far more on the text itself, and what the writer was attempting to convey. The first session was dominated by content questions and pre-writing activities, combined with an almost obsessive interest in surface details. In the second session, the class jumped all over the text and indicated sections that they found strange, obscure or clumsy. They questioned the inclusion of sections they felt were irrelevant and encouraged expansion of other areas.

The total experience was very informative for me as a teacher as I found myself very much in the position that the class must be in when they begin their writing assignments. To some extent, we used a similar format, in that we discussed the topic and criteria for assessing the piece at the beginning, as we do with the students' pieces. We did not examine a model text in this case, as we usually do, as I was hoping my text would be useful as a model. I tried at all times to keep the writing in the kind of language and style I thought would appeal to the class. Mindful that this class have had very limited reading and textual experiences, I didn't want to write in a style which was inaccessible to them. I believe I may have gone too far in the other direction, and that the final text is overly simplistic and thin. I was trying very hard to stick with simple sentence structures, as the main fault with almost all writing produced by the students is that they attempt enormously complex sentence structures which don't quite hang together.

I found the fact that we do not share a metalanguage to describe faults and features of texts very frustrating. At the request of the class, we spent some time early in the term examining traditional grammar. We have not devoted much time to this because it is so daunting and time consuming, but they do have some basic terms in place. They wanted them so they can use them to assist their children with homework. (One Lismore school in particular seems to have bowed to the pressure to go "back to basics" by giving the students "Fill in the noun/Add an appropriate adjective" style of grammar exercises.) I prefer the functional approach to grammar, but once again, the limited timeframe means it is difficult to cover topics in depth.

This was a very challenging and interesting experience as I have always considered writing as an activity pursued in reflective silence, with the writer attempting to capture the perfect text from the deep recesses of the mind while simultaneously filling capacious wastepaper baskets with rejected versions. I deliberately avoided pre-planning the actual writing task before the class, so that it would be more honest and more interesting. I am not sure now that this was not a mistake, but at least I was closer as a writer to the



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position of my students: "because writing is a more permanent record of one's language proficiency than is speaking, the demand for unrehearsed writing is more threatening to the learner" (Brown & Hood 1989). Because I put myself in a vulnerable position, exposing myself as a writer, I became more realistically aware of the thoughts and feelings of a less experienced writer and perceived more clearly how writing can be so daunting to my students. I was also allowing them to see the risks writers take in the mistakes I made, so that they could see that there was more to redrafting texts than merely editing.

I wanted to employ a revision model, where changes are tried and considered at all levels. "There is overwhelming evidence that older and more competent writers do more revising for meaning and make more sentence and theme changes than do younger and less competent writers" (Fitzgerald 1988). One of the main points I was attempting to demonstrate to my students is that very few writers get it right first time. I was attempting, as a model writer, to demonstrate the process of reworking and revisiting a text on many levels. The main objective was to demonstrate that, as writers, the primary task is to "get their ideas down on paper, organise these ideas and develop them without the simultaneous need to satisfy the surface demands of written text conventions" (Soter 1987).

Many adult literacy students may have very wide and interesting experiences of spoken genres of language and yet are at a much earlier stage of development with written texts. If we consider the features of spoken and written language as a continuum (Hammond et al. 1992), the students must come to appreciate that the features of written language vary most widely from spoken language when it comes to encapsulating personal experience and expression of responses to experience. I believe that this may be one of the reasons that this class finds functional texts easier to produce, as these are more closely associated with action, as is speech. I agree with Hammond et al. when they define the literacy teacher's role primarily as "teaching students to shape and organise written texts in ways that are different from speech". We need to develop paradigms for describing the content of "typical" texts, a more comprehensive framework that provides rich descriptions of the content or discourse of texts as distinct from a primary focus on grammatical and linguistic textual features. Many adult literacy students have been disadvantaged in writing on many levels. Not only are they typically unfamiliar with many of the highly valued genres of schools and overly concerned with their lack of ability at creative or self-expressive writing, but they are also dismayed by the difficulties they often experience with the actual tools of written discourse such as spelling, punctuation and grammar.

One feature of this activity that was of most interest to both the students and myself was composing a piece of writing on the computer. I am not a teacher of computer skills *per se*, but I do use computers often in the literacy classroom. I may not remember to teach my students the many things I do automatically on the computer to short-cut the writing process. My transcripts were brief partly because we looked at word processing elements at all times. I did not find this a waste of time, as I believe that using the computer will assist my students to take control of their own writing. A recent study found that "being able to produce a quality final wordprocessed product has increased student self-confidence in their abilities" (Munro 1990). Some of my students would certainly attest to this experience.

Some of the text types required by the CGEA syllabus do not fit into a particular genre. This is certainly true of "writing for self expression". It could be a simple recount or a quite elaborate narrative. It needs to combine "experiential meanings, interpersonal meanings and textual meanings" (Butt et al. 1995). Without examining such complex metalanguage with my students, I attempted to examine the text in terms of these features at the expense of dwelling on surface features. This was difficult, but a pursuit I will continue in future writing lessons. I was interested in the language features of a personal recount which could be summarised as "orientation", a "series of events" followed by a "personal comment" (Derewianka 1990). I am concerned that the prescriptive nature of some of the writing tasks the students attempt mean that, as literacy teachers, we are "presenting ourselves as arbiters of what counts as literacy to a community that has not generally learnt to read our announcements critically" (Freebody 1992).

Lessons learnt

In conclusion, the main thing that I have learned during this experience is that writing with a class involves much more than sharing in text construction or even presenting texts I have prepared beforehand to the students as models. I identified much more clearly with the anxieties and problems of students when they are writing. Although I found there were artificial constraints on the writing, and although the product is not a wonderful example of the assignment task the students are currently engaged in constructing, both the class and myself learned a great many things about the way writing happens. I am particularly pleased that they seem to be starting to give up their obsession with ▶

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surface features, so that focusing on these will not inhibit their writing. The students are also coming to the realisation that writing is always a struggle, and that constructing, clarifying and revising written texts are the most important tasks.

I was interested to discover that the curriculum I have been using has interesting problematic features which I need to address in future practice. Providing models of text types is difficult if the analysis of textual features is hampered by difficulties with language to describe these features. I am more aware of the need to combine all elements of the writing process with the need to encourage and support student writing. I would encourage other teachers to take that leap and model a text of their own for and with students.

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